

The *Íslendingasögur* and Ireland

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It would not be difficult to devote an entire conference to aspects of the relationships and possible relationships between the Icelandic sagas and Ireland. This paper will necessarily focus on quite a narrow area of the topic. In concentrating on the *Íslendingasögur* it is in very good company, for many have been particularly fascinated by these vivid, highly readable prose narratives. But of course the *Íslendingasögur* are by no means the only Icelandic sagas to deal with Ireland. Ireland is frequently mentioned in sagas allocated to other literary genres, notably the *konungasögur* but also the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. The justification for focusing on the *Íslendingasögur* is that they provide an opportunity to look particularly at the Irish experience of relatively ordinary people - farmers, farmers' sons, traders - rather than those of kings and earls and well nigh superhuman heroes. But the division of Icelandic literature into genres like *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur* is both modern and somewhat arbitrary (Cardew, 2000), and the decision to concentrate on the *Íslendingasögur* here is partly a reflection of what can reasonably be accomplished in a short paper.

This paper would need to be very different if its subject was 'The *Íslendingasögur* and the Irish' rather than '*Íslendingasögur* and Ireland'. The sagas and *Landnámaþók* suggest that it was by no means only in Ireland that an Icelander might encounter Irish men and women. Apart from the religious recluses, the *pápar*, who were living in Iceland when the Norse colonisation of the country began, there were, according to these sources, Norse people from Ireland and people with Irish Celtic blood among the free settlers in Iceland, and numerous Irish slaves amongst those who accompanied the *landnámamenn* to the new country. The Irish strain in the physical and cultural make-up of the early Icelanders is a fascinating subject. One leaves it aside reluctantly, conscious that their awareness of the Irish presence in their own country may have influenced the way the saga authors saw the Irish in Ireland.

Ireland is only one of the foreign lands encountered in the *Íslendingasögur*, and there are frequent mentions of another Celtic realm, Scotland. The sagas, however, display quite a clear understanding of Ireland (*Ireland*) as a distinct entity (Hudson, 1994, 323n). Historically the Norse experience in Ireland was different from that in other lands such as Scotland, England, and Normandy, where there was extensive Norse colonisation. Ireland, despite the importance of the towns the Norse founded, remained primarily a Celtic, Irish-speaking land. It seems a legitimate focus of special attention.

The main body of this paper is divided into four main sections. The first concentrates on scattered reference to Ireland in the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámaþók*, the *Íslendingasögur* being for this purpose the works appearing in Íslensk fornrit volumes 2 to 14. The second section will look at *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, which describes an Icelandic poet's visit to Norse Dublin, while the third will examine a young Icelander's visit to his Irish royal grandfather in *Laxdæla saga*. The fourth section will concentrate on two sagas, the well-known *Brennu-Njáls saga*

and the incompletely preserved and rather neglected *Þorsteins saga Siðu-Hallssonar*, both of which set part of their action at the Battle of Clontarf, fought near Dublin on 23 April 1014.

Ireland figures with other countries when at the beginning of *Landnámabók* the Norse settlement of Iceland is located in time and place. The settlement begins when Kjarvalr (or Kjarvall) is king in Dublin. This is considered to be a reference to Cerball (or Cerball) of Osraige, who died in 887 or 888, though he did not, in fact, rule in Dublin. (*Landnámabók*, 1968, S2, 32, H2, 33, 33n; Hull, 1901-03, 236-9). Reykjanes in southern Iceland is said to be five *dægr* by sea from Jölduhlaup in Ireland (or three *dægr*, depending on the manuscript one consults - S2, 32, 34; H2, 33). Etymological and geographical detective work has identified Jölduhlaup with what in English is known as Slyne Head in Connemara (Helgi Guðmundsson, 1997, 74). The precise significance of the word *dægr* is, unfortunately, a tantalising puzzle (Fritzner, 1883-96, I, 282-3; Hødbeø, 1972, 79; Ingstad, 1969, 36) and there is no record in the medieval sources of anyone sailing directly between the two points mentioned.

It has been estimated that about one-seventh of the four hundred prominent settlers in Iceland mentioned in *Landnámabók* had Celtic connections (Jones, 1984, 279), though the matter continues to be debated. References to residence in Ireland before coming to Iceland are not unusual, nor are references to descent from Irish kings and princesses. The saga writers were possibly unaware how well endowed Ireland was with royalty in the ninth and tenth centuries, and how limited the authority of such people might be: the kings who appear are regularly designated *Írakonungr*, 'king of the Irish'. We are generally not told much about the lives in Ireland of Irish ancestors or migrants from Ireland to Iceland (not to mention the previous careers of the Irish slaves). The saga authors certainly considered intermarriage between Norse and Celt to be a feature of Irish life, however, and in *Flóamanna saga* (ch. 16, 262-3) a well-born lady temporarily abducted in Ireland by Norsemen turns out to be usefully fluent in both Norse and Irish, being descended from Norwegians on her mother's side.

In *Kjalnesinga saga* we do, exceptionally, learn something of the Irish background of a settler. Örlygr, despite his Norse name, is *írskr at allri ætt* (ch. 1, 3, 'entirely of Irish descent'). For reasons unexplained he incurs the anger of Konofogor *Írakonungr* (King Connor of the Irish) and on the advice of a kinsman, a bishop named Patrekr, he migrates to Iceland with religious objects supplied by the bishop and much good advice. On the other hand in *Landnámabók*, a source universally considered more reliable than the somewhat romantic *Kjalnesinga saga*, Örlygr's ancestry is Norse and Patrekr is located in the Hebrides (S15, 52, 54, H15, 53, 55).

Unsurprisingly, considering that we are dealing with accounts of the Viking age, Ireland in the *Islendingasögur* can be a place where Norsemen raid, sometimes gaining there plunder and slaves, sometimes with the result that they conquer part of the island. The resistance met on such Viking incursions was not always exclusively from the native Irish. In the sagas, as in the Irish sources dealing with the same period, Norsemen are sometimes found allying themselves with the native Irish and defending Irish interests against fellow Norsemen. Thus in *Laxdæla saga* the young Icelander Kjartan fights bravely for his Celtic grandfather, the king of the Irish, against *vikingar ok úthlaupsmenn* (ch. 21, 58, 'Vikings and raiders') while in *Grettis saga*

Asmundarsonar a Norseman who has married the daughter of a native Irish king and who has *landvörn fyrir Írlandi* (ch. 3, 8, ‘responsibility for the Irish defences’) is only with the greatest difficulty dissuaded from attacking fellow Norsemen, despite a pointed suggestion from a friend of both Norse parties that such conflict between Scandinavians would be inappropriate (ch. 5, pp.13-14).

The *Íslendingasögur* realistically suggest that Irish and Norse were likely to fear each other. In *Laxdæla saga* it is not merely the martial bearing of young Óláfr and his crew that intimidates the Irish and causes them to break off their attack. To quote the saga:

Síðan kemr kurr mikill i lið þeira, ok bykkir þeim nú auðvitat, at betta var herskip, ok muni vera miklu fleiri skipa ván ... (ch. 21, 55-56)

‘There was now a great murmuring in the [native Irish] forces, and it seemed to them obvious that this was a warship, and many more ships were to be expected ...’

The Norse too don’t always welcome an encounter. In *Fóstbraðra saga* Norsemen blown off course to Ireland consider *ósynn friðrinn* (ch. ch. 8, 158, ‘peace uncertain’) if they are driven onto the coast, though they are able to escape a close encounter when the wind direction changes. One’s life or one’s freedom could be in danger if one fell into Irish hands, as some minor figures in *Eyrbyggja saga* state (ch. 29, 76-7), though as they have just been raiding in Ireland, their fears about that happening are very understandable. In *Eiríks saga rauða* a Norse crew is driven off course to Ireland, captured, beaten, and enslaved and *eftir því sem kaupmenn hafa sagt* (ch. 9, 226, ‘according to the report of traders’) their captain dies there. The reader is perhaps meant to consider this a just fate, at least for the captain, for shortly before he has been seen engaging in heathen practices, to the horror of his Christian companions. In *Droplaugarsona saga* an Icelander is taken captive and held in bonds in Ireland. The saga initially states that his brothers learn of this, go abroad, secure his release and bring him back to Iceland, though rather confusingly it is stated a little later that the man died in Ireland (ch.4, 147; ch. 8, 155, 155n).

Yet visits to Ireland could be peaceable in intention and outcome. This applies particularly to the Irish towns which were, of course, essentially Norse foundations. *Landnámabók* mentions Hrafn Hlymreksfari, ‘Hrafn the Limerick-Farer’, *er lengi hafði verit í Hlymreki á Írlandi* (S122, H94, 162, ‘who had been for a long time in Limerick in Ireland’). Why is not stated, but trade is an obvious possibility.

Dublin, however, is a greater focus of attention. *Kaupskip mun ek fá þér í hendr ok þar með kaupeyri; farðu síðan suðr til Dyflinnar; sú er nú ferð frægst* (ch. 32, 84; ‘I’ll give you a trading ship and cargo. Go south to Dublin: that’s the most renowned of journeys these days’), a chieftain in Norway tells his headstrong son in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Though in the sagas ships sailing towards Europe from Iceland habitually head first for Norway, *Eyrbyggja saga* mentions trips from Dublin to Iceland by two different Icelandic traders, as well as a voyage from Dublin to Iceland by a crew consisting mainly of Irishmen and Hebrideans, with a few Norsemen (ch. 29, 76; ch. 64, 176; ch. 50, 137). *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* recounts that the famous Icelandic poet Gunnlaugr Illugason visited Dublin, and according to *Landnámabók* there was a *skáld* of Icelandic origin, Porgils orraskáld, at the court of the Norse king

Ólafr kváran in tenth century Dublin (S31, 71) though unfortunately no more is known of him.

The Irish scene in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* is brief and relatively self-contained:

Síðan siglir Gunnlaugr af Englandi með kaumónnum norð til Dyfiannar. Þá réð fyrir Írlandi Sigtryggr konungr silkiskegg, sonr Óláfs kvárans ok Kormlaðar drótningar; hann hafði þá skamma stund ráðit ríkinu. Gunnlaugr gekk þá fyrir konung ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga. Konungr tók honum sœmilia. Gunnlaugr mælti: 'Kvæði hefi ek ort yðr, ok vilda ek hljóð fá.' Konungr svarar: 'Ekki hafa menn til þess orðit fyrr, at fcera mér kvæði, ok skal víst hlýða.'

Gunnlaugr kvað þá drápuna, ok er þetta stefit í:

6. Elr svóru skæ

Sigtryggr við hræ

Ok þetta er þar

7. Kann ek móls of skil,
hvem ek mæra vil
konungmanna kon,
hann's Kvárans son;
munu gramer við mik
venr hann gjøfli sik,
þess man grepp vara,
gollhring spara.

8. Segi hildingr mér,
ef hann heyrði sér
dýrlingra brag,
þat's drópu lag.

Konungr þakkaði honum kvæðit ok kallaði til sín féhirði sinn ok mælti svá: 'Hverju skal launa kvæðit?' Hann svarar: 'Hverju vili þér, herra?' segir hann. 'Hversu er launat,' segir konungr, 'ef ek gef honum knorrutvá?' Féhirðirinn svarar: 'Of mikit er þat, herra,' segir hann; 'aðrir konungar gefa at bragarlaunum gripi góða, sverð góð eða gullhringa góða.' Konungr gaf honum klæði sín af nýju skarlati, kyrti hlaðbúinn ok skikkju með ágætum skinnum ok gullhring, er stóð mörk. Gunnlaugr þakkaði honum vel ok dvalðisk þar skamma stund ok fór þaðan til Orkneyja. (Ch.8, 74-6)

It may be noted first of all that this scene takes place entirely within Norse Ireland, with Sigtryggr being represented, quite erroneously, as the king of the entire country. There would of course have been little point in Gunnlaugr displaying his talents in the complex skaldic verse to a Celtic king unable to understand Norse fluently.

Dublin in the days of King Sigtryggr Silkbeard, about the year 1000, was probably in reality one of the more sophisticated and cosmopolitan centres of population in Western Europe. The author of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* paints a rather different picture, however. The king appears a rather naive, unsophisticated figure, childishly pleased at being honoured by the poem (which possibly we are meant to consider a bit meretricious). The reward he proposes, two trading ships, is clearly excessive and reflects his lack of self-assurance. The saga states that he is new on the throne, but most young Norse princes would have opportunities to observe the

ways of kings with poets, and perhaps there is also a suggestion of something a bit isolated and provincial about the Dublin court. Gunnlaugr's triumph there is perhaps flawed, because too easily won. This would be in keeping with the way he is presented elsewhere in the saga: he is a man of considerable ability, but for reasons that sometimes have to do with fate and sometimes with his own character things rarely go quite right for him.

By contrast the Irish episode in *Laxdæla saga* is set among the Celtic Irish, and the knowledge of the Irish language which the young Icelander Óláfr Höskuldsson has acquired in Iceland from his mother proves extremely useful. Óláfr is the son of a prominent Icelander and a foreign concubine, Melkorka, who claims after the boy's birth to be in fact the daughter of Mýrkjartan, a king in Ireland. When Óláfr is about eighteen his mother arranges for him to visit Ireland, being no longer able to endure her son's being referred to as an *ambáttarsonr*, 'concubine's son'. The presentation of the Irish episode is quite vivid. After a rather lavish send-off from the royal court of Norway Óláfr becomes lost in fogs and eventually fetches up on a part of the Irish coast *fjarri hafnum þeim eða kaupstöðum, er útlendir menn skulu hafa frið* ('far from the harbours and trading centres where foreigners ought to enjoy safe conduct'). The local Irish demand that the Norse surrender their property to them, claiming that this is the law, and they launch an attack on the Norse ship when Óláfr, speaking in Irish, refuses to comply, only to withdraw somewhat ingloriously when they realise how well prepared for battle the Norse are. Matters look grim for the Norsemen, however, when a large band of horsemen is seen riding up. Fortunately the newcomers are led by King Mýrkjartan. With dignified lack of haste Óláfr reveals to him that he is his grandson, and the king is measured in his response, granting Óláfr and his men safe-conduct but reserving judgment on the kinship claim. When he does acknowledge it, aided by a ring belonging to Óláfr's mother and the young man's family resemblance, Mýrkjartan invites Óláfr to his court (which, surprisingly for that of native Irish king in this period, has a base in Dublin) but he says that the honour he will receive will depend on how impressive a man he proves to be. Óláfr of course does not disappoint the king, and Mýrkjartan offers to make him his heir, an offer politely declined by the young Icelander, who realises that the king's sons will be hostile and feels an obligation to return to his mother in Iceland (ch. 21, 52-9).

In the sage the episode effectively serves the purpose of greatly enhancing the social status of Óláfr in Iceland: the stigma of being a concubine's son is largely removed. The extent of the saga author's knowledge of Ireland is problematic: the name Mýrkjartan is usually considered to be a Norse rendering of the Irish name *Muircertach* (or *Muircheartach*) but there were several King Muircertachs in the tenth century, and there has been debate as to which if any of them should be identified with the saga king (Craigie, 1896-7, 262; Hull, 1901-3, 249ff; *Laxdæla saga*, 1934, pp. LXI-LXII; Young, 1933-4, 95; Heller, 1960, pp. 20ff). To the modern mind there is little Irish 'local colour' in the episode, but a desire for such local colour reflects modern sensibilities far more than those of the Middle Ages. The attitude displayed towards the Irish is not particularly hostile or friendly: King Mýrkjartan is dignified and regal; and while the Irish who demand Óláfr's goods and attack his ship might be charged with greed and cowardice, they do argue that they have the law on their side, and they offer safe conduct until the Norsemen's status has been determined by their

king. We may be dealing here with a rather aristocratic author's disdain for a mob, rather than any anti-Irish feeling.

One of the many links between the subject matter of *Laxdæla saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* is Norse literature's best-known dog, Sámr, which in the latter work Óláfr presents to the hero Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi with the comment that he himself was given the animal in Ireland (ch. 70, 173). *Brennu-Njáls saga* is, however more famous for its extended treatment of the Battle of Clontarf, which, as mentioned earlier, also figures in *Þorsteins saga Siðu-Hallssonar*, though the treatment there is much more concise (ch. 2, 301-2). *Þorsteins saga* refers to it as *orrostu frægst ... fyrir vestan hafit, bæði at fjólmanni ok stórtíðendum þeim, sem þar urðu* ('the most famous of battles ... west over the sea, both for the large number of men involved and the great events which happened there'), and the author of another of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Ljósvertninga saga*, apparently believed that a statement about an Icelander that he *felli i Brjánsorrustu* (ch. 12, 61, 'fell in Brian's battle') did not need further elaboration.

In the *Þorsteins saga Siðu-Hallssonar* account there are puzzles, notably the reference to a place called Dumazbakki on or near the battlefield. But the Clontarf episode plays a clear role in developing the picture of the saga's central figure, Þorsteinn Siðu-Hallsson, who feels himself honour-bound to accompany his host Earl Sigurðr of Orkney to Ireland and who behaves courageously there, though he prudently rejects the earl's request that he carry a banner which has already cost the lives of three of its bearers. The death of the Irish king Brian is mentioned, as is the evisceration of his slayer Bróðir (though such a form of punishment or revenge appears to have been unknown in Ireland during the period described - see Goedheer, 1938, 99; Hill, 1981, 437-44). Distinctively Irish detail is conspicuous by its absence.

Brennu-Njáls saga, by contrast, provides a detailed account of the political manoeuvring leading up to the battle, and a good deal of information about King Brian's family, several members of which are named. The details sometimes agree strikingly with Irish sources, and at other times are very difficult to reconcile with them. What is said of the Irish in the saga is generally very complimentary: indeed, in referring to the king himself the writer becomes virtually hagiographical. Brian is *alra konunga best at sér* ('the best of all kings'), his character can be judged from the fact that he habitually forgives wrongdoers three times for the same offence, though he lets the law take its course if they offend again. When he is slain, his blood miraculously heals the wound of a boy who sought to defend him, and his own severed head re-attaches itself to the trunk (ch. 154, 440-2; ch. 157, 453). The one Irish figure to receive unfavourable treatment is Brian's ex-wife Kormlóð (better known to history as Gormflaith). She is comprehensively condemned:

Hon var alra kvenna fegrst ok bestr orðin um allt þat, er henni var ósjálfrátt, en þat er mál manna, at henni hafi allt verit illa gefit, þat er henni var sjálfrátt (ch. 154, 440),

('She was the most beautiful of women and the best in respect to everything that was not under her control, but it is said that she was utterly evil in respect of all that did lie in her power.'

Such material, and the profusion of supernatural occurrences associated with the battle make the Clontarf episode in *Brennu-Njáls saga* rather unlike the rest of that saga, and indeed most of the *Íslendingasögur*. For over a century the idea that a now

lost **Brjáns saga* - written, some believe, in Dublin by a writer with detailed local knowledge - was used extensively in creating the Clontarf episode in *Brennu-Njáls saga* as we now have it, and some consider it also to lie behind the Clontarf episode in *Þorsteins saga Siðu-Hallssonar* (see Lönnroth, 1976, 8-9, 226ff; Ó Corráin, 1997, 105-6; Ó Corráin, 1998, 448-50). But not everyone accepts the hypothesis of a written **Brjáns saga*, and it is also not certain how *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins saga* are related to each other. They differ quite considerably on points of detail. In *Þorsteins saga*, for example, the Icelander Þorsteinn is asked by a companion why he does not flee, and he replies: *Því at ek tek eigi heim í kveld, þó at ek flýja* ('because I cannot get home tonight even if I flee'). In *Brennu-Njáls saga* he makes a similar reply, but to King Brian's foster-son Kerbjálfaðr, who catches up with him when Þorsteinn bends down to tie up a shoe-thong in the midst of a general rout. The Irishman sportingly gives him quarter (ch. 157, 452).

Þorsteins saga does not clearly indicate the victors in the battle, but the prose of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and one short poem, indicate that it was the Brian and his allies, or perhaps one should say, the Christians, in view of the way the saga presents the battle. Puzzlingly, however, the saga also incorporates an eleven stanza poem, known as *Darraðarljóð*, which seems to suggest that the battle was a Norse triumph over the Irish. Several explanations for the discrepancy have been proposed, but none seems without considerable difficulties (Goedheer, 1938, 74ff; Poole, 1991, 120ff).

Many readers probably feel that the Clontarf episode in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, interesting though it is, has relatively little to do with the rest of the saga which, to state the matter baldly, deals with feuds in Iceland. There is a link: fifteen of those involved in the burning to death of the central figure Njáll and most of his family die at Clontarf. But the saga does not trace their involvement in the battle. Scholars attempting to justify the Clontarf episode on artistic grounds generally speak of its transferring to a larger sphere such concerns of the saga as the struggle between good and evil, or the conflict between Christian and pagan ways. Some see parallels between the wise and good Icelander Njáll and King Brian, and between the Icelander Hallgerðr and Queen Kormnlǫð, both very beautiful but treacherous (Fox, 1963, 308; Allen, 1971, 159-60; Sayers, 1988, 97). How satisfactory these explanations are may be open to debate, but probably few would dispute that the battle provides a satisfying climax in the closing pages of the great saga, just before the muted final scenes of reconciliation and resignation.

Peter Sawyer (1982, 359) saw similarities (as well as fundamental differences) between Ireland and Iceland in the Viking age:

... these two Atlantic islands had more in common than their size. Neither had towns, and neither used coins; their social stratification - lords, freemen and slaves - was in practice identical; the power and status of lords was reflected by, and based upon, a following of *þingmenn* or clients. Personal security and the protection of honour depended on the support of lords as well as kinsmen. Compensation for injury, or for loss of honour, was exacted under threats of violence, with outlawry of varying severity as an additional penalty. ... In Iceland, as in Ireland, political divisions were not incompatible with linguistic, cultural and

legal unity, and in both the law was the preserve of specially qualified men who seem to have rejoiced in its complexity.

The *Íslendingasögur* do not display an awareness of this degree of cultural kinship: Magnus Fjalldal's comment in a recent book that 'For medieval Icelanders Anglo-Saxon England largely existed in a never-never land' (2005, 124) can largely be reapplied to Ireland in the *Íslendingasögur*. But neither do these sagas show in their presentation of Ireland what Edward Cowan describes as 'the racist contempt which the Icelanders reserved for all Celtic peoples' or the 'disdain' for the Celts to which William Sayers has alluded (Cowan, 1984, 114; Sayers 1991, 180). Perhaps it is fair to say, at least as regards the inhabitants of Ireland, both Celtic and Norse, that the *Íslendingasögur* pay them the compliment of treating them much as they do the Icelanders themselves, as people to be respected or not according to their personal merits.

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